



Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council (DLR)

Vacant Homes Action Plan 2017-2020

Introduction

The Department of Housing Planning and Local Government (DHPLG) by letter dated 2nd August 2017, (Circular PL 7/2017 refers), mandated all local authorities in the Dublin area and the other four main cities to develop and adopt Vacant Homes Action Plans by the end of October 2017. The general objective of the Action Plan is to get a better understanding of the current vacancy levels, to ascertain where empty homes are located and who owns these vacant properties and then to prioritise and target those areas where housing demand is most acute.

Local Context

The demand for social housing in DLR far outreaches supply and as a result there are almost 5000 people on the social housing support list. DLR is maximising delivery through utilising all options available in order to increase housing supply, including construction, acquisitions, leasing, HAP and RAS and through working co-operatively with Approved Housing Bodies.

Due to the very high rental income that can be achieved in the private residential sector in the DLR area and the high demand there are very few vacant properties or properties available for rent in the market in this administrative area.

However there are some properties vacant as they are not up to letting standard, utilising these vacant homes is another option which may assist in addressing increasing demand. Bringing vacant homes back into use is also of benefit to communities as vacant properties, can be unsightly and attract anti-social behaviour.

Census 2016

According to the 2016 Census vacant dwellings rate for DLR fell from 7.5 per cent in 2011 to 5.7 per cent in 2016 which is considerably lower than the national average of 12.8 per cent. The 2016 vacancy rate is also below the 6 per cent base rate expected in a functioning market due to selling, rental gaps, deaths etc.

Geodirectory

The Geodirectory figures differ from the CSO and highlights that there are 2023 number of vacant homes in DLR. Many of these are 'transactional vacancies' and are necessary for the normal operation of the housing market, so when used as a headline figure, it needs to be treated with some caution. What is required is to ascertain the number of suitable homes that have been vacant for long periods over 12 months. It is these long term vacant homes which cause most concern as they are more likely to remain vacant for longer without intervention, and are also more likely to be an increasing source of blight and complaint. DLR has been proactive in terms of identifying vacant homes suitable for housing purposes, one property which

was in the derelict sites register for a number of years was compulsory purchased, refurbished and is now re-let, another one is currently being progressed.

In addition the Housing Agency, on behalf of the Council, is liaising with the major financial institutions in relation to purchase of vacant units to be sold on to DLR for use as social housing. There are 16 properties in the process of completion.

Repair to Lease scheme

The Repair to Lease Scheme, which launched in March 2017 under the Government's *Rebuilding Ireland: An Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness*, is targeted at long term vacant properties. Under the scheme up to €40,000 can be made available to the property owner to make the property compliant with the Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 2017. The refurbished property, under a lease agreement, is then made available to accommodate a person from the Councils social housing list. Depending on the level of funding the cost of repairs is either recouped by agreeing a rent free period, a consistent reduction over the duration of the lease or a term which is scaled against the duration of the lease. To qualify for the scheme properties must be vacant, must be suitable for social housing and the cost of making the dwelling compliant should not exceed €40,000.

Buy to Renew Scheme

The DHPLG also launched a Buy to renew scheme to deal with vacant properties where the condition is such that substantial works in excess of €40,000 would be required to bring it up to a letting standard.

Identifying vacant properties

The initial overview: The Geo Directory identified 2023 properties as possible vacant properties in the Dun Laoghaire Rathdown area. Following a desk top exercise 1,545 properties were able to be eliminated as they were either business or retail premises or new builds under construction. This resulted in a list of 478 possible units. Following a more detailed examination of this list, some by visual inspection, further properties have been eliminated for reasons such as the existence of a recent planning permission, property being sold, occupied, size, location, cost, etc.

The initial Result: There is a resultant **77** private properties which may possibly be vacant dwellings.

Actions to address vacant private housing

- The DHPLG launched a media campaign to raise awareness of the Repair to Lease scheme on 29th May 2017. The campaign was run over a two week period, Phase 1 being a Digital Media campaign and Phase 2 the placement of advertisements for the scheme in the National Print media.

DLR also issued a call for all owners of vacant residential properties in the spring edition of the DLR Times and details of the scheme are available on the Councils website at www.dlrcoco.ie (<http://www.dlrcoco.ie/en/housing/housing-delivery/expressions-interest-all-owners-vacant-properties-avail-repair-and-leasing>). Details have also been advertised on our social media platforms.

- A vacant homes officer has been nominated.
- The Council has also written to Residents Associations and the Association of Property Managers to ask them to let us know of any vacant properties under their remit that they are aware of. We will be pro-active in following up on any properties that are brought to our attention.
- 77 properties have been identified as being possible vacant dwellings and visual inspections will continue to be carried out on these properties from the GeoDirectory list to determine if they are vacant and suitable for the repair to lease scheme. A further 36 units have been listed on www.vacanthomes.ie these units will also be checked.
- Information will be left at any vacant properties confirmed and steps will be taken to identify the property owner with a view to establishing their interest in the scheme.
- The Council will advertise the Repair to Lease scheme again in a future edition of the DLR Times and on social medial platforms to keep the public aware of the scheme.

Results To Date:

Repair to lease

An agreement between the Council and one property owner is at a very advanced stage.

Compulsory Purchase

One property acquired and one being progressed.

Actions to address vacant social housing

DLR is very conscious of the need to minimise the number of vacant social housing units and the amount of time that social housing units are left vacant and there is a clear emphasis in our work-plans to turnaround such properties as quickly as possible. The Housing Department deal with approximately 130 – 150 re-let units each year and the focus is to turn around and make the majority of these units available for re-let within 5 – 6 weeks. Re-let works are managed by in-house Inspectors and Contractors. In some instances it may take a further number of weeks before a Tenant accepts and moves into the refurbished unit.

In the last quarter of 2017 there are 4 vacant/void units that require major refurbishment and will need professional input from Architect, Engineer, Quantity Surveyor etc. Accordingly these units will take substantially longer to turnaround and in some instances may be specifically adapted for a Tenant.

Where there is a proposal to redevelop an area some units may be vacant or be actively de-tenanted to facilitate the re-development, there are fourteen vacant properties in DLR which fall into this category. The re-development proposals will in the majority of cases provide for improved density and the capacity to develop substantially more homes on the site.

Choice-based letting

Choice based letting has also been introduced as a way of renting properties in hard to let areas, this has also helped to reduce the time a property is left vacant.

Maintenance of existing housing stock

DLR has been operating a Planned Preventative Maintenance Programme for the past 10 years. The purpose of the programme is to achieve value for money through economies of scale in relation to the works carried out and to improve our housing stock while Tenants are still in situ. This has greatly assisted in minimising the works required between re-lets due to the good condition of our housing stock. Examples of works carried out under our Planned Programmes to date are - Full new heating systems, - Window and Door replacements, - Full re-wiring, - Exterior repair and painting Programme and Smoke and Carbon Alarms etc.

Summary

Below is a table of planned actions to address vacant private housing in DLR

Vacant Homes Action Plan 2017 -2020					
Action	Target/outcome	Action/Description	Target Date	Lead Officer	Progress
1	Ascertain vacant homes in DLR	Appoint Vacant Homes Officer		Director Housing	Appointed
2	Raise Awareness of Vacant Homes Initiatives including Repair & Leasing; Buy and Renew Scheme and www.vacanthomes.ie	Targeted press releases/ Internet Proactive mailout to Residents' Associations/Management Companies Proactive mailout to vacant home owners	Ongoing	Vacant Homes Officer	Ongoing
3	Assemble relevant, accurate and current information	Carry out desktop analysis of GeoDirectory Data to ascertain true level of vacancies	Sept 2017	Vacant Homes officer	Completed
4	Visually inspect properties and identify owners of vacant homes	Information drop to vacant properties with details of repair to lease scheme. Carry out references of vacant properties to try and identify owners Where identified instigate direct communication process with owners of vacant homes		Vacant Homes officer	
5	Ensure accurate recording of vacant homes identified	Set up vacant homes database www.vacanthomes.ie	Ongoing	Vacant Homes officer	Will be updated to ensure accurate data
6	Work with other agencies/bodies to bring vacant homes back into use	Work with Housing Agency to purchase vacant homes Work with AHBs to turn around repair to lease properties	Ongoing	Senior officers housing	16 number currently being progressed
7	CPO – appropriate derelict properties	Work with Property Management section to carry out CPO	Ongoing	Senior officer housing	1 acquired and 1 being progressed

Summary of tasks carried out to-date in relation to the vacant homes

- Media campaign to raise awareness of the repair to lease scheme launched on 29th May 2017.
- Details advertised in the DLR Times and on social media platforms
- Details of the scheme available on the Councils website at www.dlrcoco.ie (<http://www.dlrcoco.ie/en/housing/housing-delivery/expressions-interest-all-owners-vacant-properties-avail-repair-and-leasing>).
- A vacant homes officer has been nominated.
- Residents Associations and the Association of Property Managers written to.
- Visual inspections will continue to be carried out on the remaining properties identified from the GeoDirectory list and any properties identified through the Vacant Homes website or by Resident Associations to determine if they are vacant, condition and suitability for the Repair to Lease Scheme.
- Information will be left at any vacant properties identified and steps will be taken to identify the property owner with a view to establishing their interest in the scheme.
- The Council will advertise the scheme again in a future edition of the DLR Times to keep the public aware of the scheme.
- Re-let works on vacant social houses will be carried out as quickly as possible to minimise the vacancy period.
- DLR will continue to use Choice based letting in hard to let areas
- Vacant properties can be listed on www.vacanthomes.ie

DLR will endeavour to bring vacant homes back into use in order to increase housing supply, however it should be noted that due to the high market rents in this administrative area, the high demand for housing and the lack of properties on the market for rent it is not envisaged that the Council will be able to deliver many units under the repair to lease scheme.